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March 8, 1960

MEMORANDUM OF CONFERENCE WITH THE PRESIDENT
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Others present: Secretary Herter, Mr. Merchant,
Mr. Bohlen, Mr. Kohler, Mr. Gates,
Mr. Douglas, Mr. Irwin, General
White, General Goodpaster

Secretary Herter saw the President alone for a few moments before the others came in. The President said that the purpose of Ambassador Menshikov's visit had been to deliver a letter from Khrushchev. In this letter Khrushchev expressed concern regarding the President's statement in recent press conferences about giving atomic weapons to our allies. The President said Khrushchev's tone had been quite respectful. The only hint of a threat was a statement that if the United States did this the Soviets might be forced to consider doing it also. The President said he told Menshikov that the United States had tried, for just this reason, to turn over all atomic weapons to the UN in 1947. The Soviets objected at that time. He added to Menshikov that he shared concern over the wider distribution of these weapons.

At this point the remainder of the group (except for Mr. Douglas and Mr. Irwin, who came in a few minutes later) joined to discuss a new development regarding our plan of action to institute high level flights to West Berlin. Mr. Herter recalled that we had, with some difficulty, obtained the agreement of the British and the French to sending a message to the Soviet commanders in Berlin on the initiation of these flights. Almost immediately, there was a serious leak of information to Joseph Alsop who wrote a column about it, highly accurate except for his indication that this note had in fact actually been sent. Concurrently Secretary Douglas was considering the matter for the first time, and had major question as to the desirability, for

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operational reasons, of initiating such flights. The JCS concurred that initiation was neither necessary nor desirable for operational reasons.

Mr. Herter recalled that the State Department, when this whole question was raised some months ago, had taken the position that they would interpose no objection if Defense made a firm statement that there was an operational necessity for these flights and that the flights would be conducted on a regular basis. Defense had made such a statement, State had gone ahead with consultations with our allies, and now we find that the U. S. is somewhat out on a limb. He anticipated some problem with the British and French if we now change our stand. The President said he thought we should simply tell them that we made a mistake and do not wish to compound it. He said the only reason he would see for going ahead is that we feel there is a need to take some action respecting Berlin that would show our independence. Mr. Gates said there had been a lot of publicity about our new intentions following the leak, and Mr. Herter said it would look like backing down in the face of Soviet pressures by the Soviet press. The President said the matter is simple in his judgment. Until the action of sending the note to the Soviets has been taken, the whole matter is in a study phase.


Regarding the question of operational need, General White said that there would be an operational requirement for flight at altitudes above 10,000 feet if another airlift had to be instituted to Berlin. The President said this consideration had been very much in his mind. However, he thought that we have made clear our right to do so and that if the necessity for an airlift arose, we would at that time do whatever we needed to do. He added that if this change in position causes the State Department any distress, the Secretary of State could tell the British and the French that the President, on considering the matter, had decided there is no operational necessity.

General White said he should add a further view of the JCS -- that they believe this is the time to start flights at altitudes above 10,000 feet if we are going to do this at any time. This

would be a cold war tactic. The President said that these considerations fell outside the military sphere, and were of concern to the State Department. He reiterated that the Secretary of State might say that on final review of the question of operational need, following the President's return from South America, he decided not to initiate this action.

The group then left, except for Mr. Gates who remained to report to the President on a meeting he had attended on the question of the Armed Forces Museum. He said there was little support for this proposal among the group he met with. They seemed to regard it as an alternative to the work of the Smithsonian Institution. The President said he found this hard to understand. A record of military activity in this country since 1607 would show military participation in every turning point in our nation's history since that time. He thought this should make a fascinating story. He illustrated the difference between a sterile exhibition and the kind of museum he has in mind by an example from the teaching of military history. He said that when he was a cadet, military history was taught by rote at West Point, and consisted simply of memorizing where each unit was on a certain day, who was its commander, what was its strength, etc. In later years a very wise senior officer of the Army suggested that he read romantic historical novels of the periods of various wars and thereby obtain a background for the military history. Gradually as he did this military history took on an entirely different meaning. He would have thought a fascinating story could be told through displays showing how our forefathers fought to defend themselves -- their log forts, their two-pounder guns, their squad huts at Valley Forge, etc.

Mr. Gates said he was afraid the President was going to get a report that would not say very much. Unfortunately, he felt that the Smithsonian people regarded this proposal as competitive with their own activities for funds.


A. J. Goodpaster
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